

Schools of Thought

Three lecturers from art academies in the USA, Germany and the UK reflect upon the strengths and failings of art education today

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The art school has been a subject of fascination for the past decade. Along with this fascination there has been an increasing growth of art programmes within both traditional independent art schools and universities. In 2001 Paul Schimmel organized 'Public Offerings', an exhibition at Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, which explored the influence of several art schools internationally, along with the artists who emerged from their courses. In the inimitable fashion of this type of curatorial enterprise, this past spring I was guilty of the same type of hagiographic offence by organizing at San Francisco Art Institute 'Work Zones: Three Decades of Contemporary Art at San Francisco Art Institute', an exhibition that surveyed the artistic careers of the school's most prominent artists on the scene today. Opening another front in the new industry of the art school narrative was 'Academy Remix', a three-day symposium organized last November by Daniel Birnbaum, Rector of the Städelschule in Frankfurt, and there have been many others.

The film-going public has recently been treated to Hollywood's entertaining but improbable spin on the lure and depredations of the art academy in Terry Zwigoff's *Art School Confidential* (2006). Another reflection on the subject was the proposed art-school-as-exhibition by the three curators of the unfortunately aborted Manifesta 6, due to have been held in Cyprus this summer. Rather than continue the exhibition model of previous editions, the curators planned to reorient the public's perception of art by taking us all 'back to school'. This return to art school sought to enervate the dialectic between art as entertainment and art as education as a ground for a more socially committed and intellectual engagement.

As we reflect on the state of the art school from various vantage points, it strikes me that none of these inquiries has had quite the impact of a 2004 article by Daniel Pink in *Harvard Business Review* titled 'The MFA is the New MBA'. Pink's premise was that the esteem of the MFA as a professional degree was on the rise, making an MFA an important component in the portfolios of those seeking to achieve the rarefied place on the economic ladder that was once the exclusive province of MBAs. The sudden elevation of the MFA from its once crepuscular habitation as one of the more useless (in the economic sense by which capitalism measures all things) advanced degrees was received by some with alacrity and by others with incredulity. For the first group the notion of an MFA equalling an MBA proved a vindication of the business model of constant enrolment growth and expansion which drives art education in the US. For the more circumspect, cynicism was immediately the order of the day.

Given today's buoyant art economy, it is not difficult to see how Pink's article could be used as evidence of the success of the art school. However, rarely is the dark irony nestled deep within the article addressed – namely, that if the MFA equals the MBA in economic worth, couldn't it

just as easily equal it in uselessness by dint of the glut of both, therefore lowering their mutual overall economic quality? While I do not reject Pink's hypothesis outright, more relevant is the extent to which an MFA equals the MBA in comparative economic worth over time. What impact will this have on the future curriculum of art education? Can an MFA degree compete with the MBA but still depart philosophically from the business school model? What sort of education should an art school provide: a business-oriented, studio-based training or an interdisciplinary programme encompassing more kinds of study and research beyond image- and object-based production?

Whatever the model and its success, the key question concerns the emerging pedagogical and artistic models that schools should be addressing. Irrespective of its strict economic value, making art is about process more than product, about building social and intellectual capital and opening up new sites of inquiry. Gaining an art education, then, is an investment in social agency. In this sense our view of the art school today needs to take into account its new context on the global stage at large, not simply the studio as the cosseted isolation room of the creative mind. The task I see for art schools lies in reconciling the experimental, radical practices of the individual artist with the unruly, unpredictable, asymmetrical relations that constitute the world in which such art is fashioned and realized. What seems apposite for me in this new context is the relation between art and education as two versions of a process of reaching awareness: self-discovery and self-emancipation. Both involve taking chances, opening oneself up to one's limits, and being challenged by the labour of making obscure knowledge immanent and palpable. Most importantly, understanding the relation between the two is a way to keep one step ahead of the MBA.

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The art academies on the European mainland have their origins in a revival of Platonism in the Early Renaissance. At the time a whole host of intellectuals saw free, informal assemblies as a means both to break with the guilds of the Middle Ages and to distinguish themselves from the scholastic pedantry of the universities. As a 'learned society of dilettantes and amateurs', the academy was an open forum whose precise nature had yet to be determined. In the course of their institutionalization the academies forfeited this fundamental quality: they became inflexible and authoritarian monsters in the service of those in power.

The model of the academy current in Germany today is still based on Romantic ideas from 1820. In the 'master class' the professor has a monopoly on the training of 'his' students: for the entire duration of their studies they engage only with this professor and the other students in the same class. The reason this system has remained stable for almost two centuries is that it repeats the patriarchal structure of the family unit, which is convenient for both sides: identification with the artist-father, imitation of his work.

On top of this, many professors, often having been appointed at a time when their market career was on a downturn, use the academy as a tool to compensate for the deflation of their self-esteem. Thus in the face of possible changes – new appointments, co-determination, etc. – the

‘masters’ behave like big landowners defending their territories. They pursue a strategy of obstruction within academic politics and deeply resent anything that grates with their vain self-image as artists – things like feminism, theory or ‘trendy Anglo-Saxon’ innovations such as Cultural Studies. Team spirit among colleagues, group work, flat hierarchies, free exchange and transparency are alien concepts at this academy; the courage to experiment and make changes is nowhere to be found.

Now these dinosaurs are being threatened with extinction: the fairy godmother slated to bring the long-overdue reforms is called the ‘Bologna Process’. Seen from close up, however, she reveals herself as a seven-headed hydra. For neo-liberalism has spawned a new monster: and this time it is aimed directly at the breeding ground of societal reproduction – i.e., the education system.

The ‘Bologna Process’ is an initiative launched in Germany by the Centre for Higher Education (CHE) to steer reform of higher education, with the primary goal of prescribing the bachelor/master system and modular curricula for Europe’s universities and degree courses. The CHE was founded in 1994 by Bertelsmann, one of the world’s most influential media corporations, to influence higher education reform. The CHE is a private limited-liability company, accountable only to the Bertelsmann Foundation. Driven by the goals of the Bertelsmann Group, the CHE muscles in on matters of state decision-making and tries to impose its business agenda on educational institutions.

This helps to explain why plans for the founding of corporate universities were dropped: after all, a takeover of the universities by the corporations themselves would be a far greater coup. All this requires is a few small structural changes: in the jargon of neo-liberal emancipation ‘the universities are granted increased autonomy’. In this way existing democratic forms of co-determination by students, staff and professors are dismantled. The university senate – responsible, among other things, for appointments – is left with a merely advisory function. By contrast, university presidents and chancellors become quasi-autocrats who are assigned a new, direct interface with the private sector in the form of the University Council (Hochschulrat), which has both supervisory and executive functions. Half of its members are non-academic (most often from the business community), and it is appointed by the president. The council in turn elects the president, who can have a non-university background. This co-dependency makes it an easy task for the private sector to gain complete and lasting control of the universities.

The 1980s saw the emergence of corporate sponsorship at universities and academies. But now these institutions are themselves gradually becoming capitalist businesses, charging hefty fees for their services. (It may come as a surprise to many readers, but in much of Europe education was still free of charge!) But now, what seems likely is a relatively low-cost, broad-based, three-year bachelor degree offering insufficient or zero professional qualification in most cases. The qualification for a decent job is acquired via a subsequent two-year master’s degree. But this level is subject to access restrictions, with only 40–60 per cent of BA students allowed to graduate to the élite. And that is not the end of it. Then comes life-long learning. In some places there already exist master’s degrees with limited validity which must be renewed every few years by participation in qualification and further training programmes – for a fee, of course. A not inconceivable scenario looms, then, in which an ever-repeated cycle will shape life from pre-

school to retirement age: get qualified, get assessed, collect points – and keep paying!

In the field of teaching and research a new type of thinking has successfully been introduced which puts the logic of the market-place and the maximization of profit over curricula or research content. Education and its institutions are not only seen as welcome new markets, and turned into a service industry in order to generate big money, but worse, are branching out via branding, merging, outsourcing and franchising in order to stake their claims to a global market of education and knowledge production. After the privatization of elementary services such as transport, media, water and energy, health and care systems, the privatization of the education system is the last major building block in the establishment of a total neo-liberal world order that is dictated by supranational groups, allowing them further to stabilize this new principle and reproduce it through ‘education’.

Sounds rather paranoid, right? But what does all this mean for art education and for art? The Conference of Art Academies in Germany recently decided against the introduction of MA/BA degrees and against the introduction of modular curricula. But the academies will not be able to resist the other higher education reforms and the introduction of fees. Unfortunately, their ‘defiant’ act means no more than a strengthening of the conservative traditionalism in which the academy with its system of master classes is trapped – albeit now inside a neo-liberal shell. The stated grounds for rejecting the MA/BA include a reference to the high percentage of German artists on the art market – after all, a system that produces so many successful artists can’t be that bad. Instead of grasping the ‘threat’ of a differentiated and modular BA/MA structure as an opportunity to develop alternative models of the academy, the reaction is to bow down devoutly before the arguments of the market and its love of rankings.

Do these (few) ladies and (far more) gentlemen not see that their supposed artistic freedom or ‘autonomy’ has long become a constituent element of neo-liberal value creation? The art market bubble will not burst, as it is a fact that the rich get richer, creating an endless demand for new ways of displaying wealth: corporate Rococo – we can’t wait for the next art fair! And those who don’t make it in the long term can still busy themselves with licking their wounds. Beyond the art market, other markets are opening up: therapy, wellness, esotericism. The Corporate Art University will be training more and more people for these sectors as well – demand is huge.

In the meantime growing numbers of free projects are taking place outside increasingly corporatized institutions – projects that could be referred to as temporary, self-organized academies – this summer, for example, in Oslo, Copenhagen, Leipzig, Berlin, Vienna and Zurich. Based on difference and collaboration these ‘learned societies of dilettantes and amateurs’ carry out project-oriented research in life and on life. In the face of the corporate takeover of society such projects take on special significance – in terms of self-determination, critical analysis of those changes in the idea of the public sphere and potential for change within society.

Translated by Nicholas Grindell

Irit Rogoff

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Trying desperately not to join the eternal lament over the over-bureaucratization of higher education in Britain, I turn my hand instead to see its 'potentiality'. This may allow me to dispense with the requirement to engage with demands for outcomes, for transfers of knowledge, for professionalization – bureaucratic demands that, when allowed to structure the discussion, must be countered by alternatives that are closer to what we believe a pedagogy might be. Instead, I want to move sideways, to argue for 'potentiality' and 'actualization' as structuring the field of education for and with and through art. What has always seemed so interesting about art education as a model for other kinds of educational and cultural activities is that it provides permission to start in the middle. This permission in turn allows those being taught to take centre stage, since they instigate its taking place and allow the processes they go through to become the substance rather than the outcome of education.

The fact that I teach in an institution of higher education is not hugely relevant for this particular discussion; the fact that this institution is engaged with creative practices is only somewhat relevant; the fact that I flounder endlessly between questions of what might be important or urgent or imperative to know at this very moment is all-important. I find myself much taken up with a notion of a 'curriculum for urgent matters', a curriculum for discovering ways of accessing the distressing issues of the day, such as security and governance and failing ecologies, which command an easy moralizing response but actually require radical rethinking.

Ours is a moment of great anxiety about education. In continental Europe there are concerns about the 'Bologna Process', which aims at homogenizing higher education across Europe and rationalizing it in accordance with the Anglo-American model of several degree courses of shorter duration, with clear and comparable outcomes. The fear that is repeatedly expressed about this process is that all individuality and possibility for a longer-term, more reflective and less outcome-bound model of education will be lost. Certainly the spectre of the extreme bureaucratization and result-oriented culture overtaking British higher education is hardly an encouraging one for the fearful 'Bologna sceptics' in Europe.

The impact this has on education in the arts is particularly thorny, because here process and investigation are everything and hard and fast 'outcomes' that testify to the successful completion of a training or an educational apprenticeship are virtually impossible to arrive at. One shudders at the thought of increasingly 'professional' artists, curators, directors and critics, whose schooling is aimed at producing prescribed museum-quality exhibitions, performances, exquisitely professional displays of cultural resistance, perfectly honed critically positioned texts worthy of publication. One shudders not because this is dull – though it is certainly that – but because the idea of being able to foresee the expected outcome of an investigative process is completely alien to the very notion of what 'education' is about.

At another level tensions have increased between different attitudes to the idea of educating 'creativity': old-fashioned notions of inspiration without articulation and slightly less old-fashioned notions of the importance of analytical and critical proficiency vie with contemporary pedagogies of actualization, embodiment and criticality as the lived-out consequences of knowing. All these jostle in the same institutional stew, occasionally producing head-on collisions but most of the time co-existing in a state of mutual tolerance, in which the contradictions and contentions of 'difference' are ignored for the sake of some ill-conceived harmony where all bases are covered.

I would argue that these factions produce a false set of conflicts and engagements. The question in education in general, and in art education in particular, that we have not yet begun to deal with is not that of specifying what we need to know and how we need to know it, of who determines this and who benefits from it. Rather, it is a question regarding how we may know what we don't yet know how to know. And it is here, in the aim of accessing this complex aspiration, that we need to change our vocabulary – to swap knowledge transfer and knowledge assessment, professionalization, quantifiable outcomes and marketability for another set of terms and another set of aspirations.

The sceptics among you will shake your heads and decry my naivety, will ask how it is possible to ignore the demands of bureaucracy and of the market, the new entrepreneurship in the arts and the all-importance of branding and consumption through the academy. Without for a moment denying the overwhelming pressure of all these factors, I would nevertheless argue that we need to learn to live in parallel rather than in conflicted economies: moving sideways, finding the opportune moment, engaging in numerous non-legitimated processes, producing the new subjects that we need for ourselves, always starting from right here and right now and forever searching for what might be important, rather than useful, to know.

Here in Britain the vestiges of an art studies culture that was initiated by foundation courses, and by the need to have a wide and 'undisciplined' vocabulary that viewed the art student as an entity to be actualized rather than trained, potentially still have some purchase. Much has been written about the British art schools of the 1960s, which produced a generation of rock musicians and writers and others. They inaugurated a shift from producing trained artists to giving access to creativity, any old creativity. Yes, it was certainly a romantic vision and, yes, it lacked the intellectual and critical rigour we would expect today, but it embraced fallibility; the failure to become an artist was the possibility of becoming something else, becoming being the operative drive. One of the most interesting aspects of potentiality is that it is as much the potential for not doing as it is for doing, for refusing as much as for embracing. 'To be potential', says Giorgio Agamben in *Potentialities* (1999), 'means to be one's own lack, to be in relation to one's own incapacity. Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality are capable of their own impotentiality; and only in this way do they become potential. They can be because they are in relation to their own non-being. In potentiality, sensation is in relation to anaesthesia, knowledge to ignorance, vision to darkness.'

The breadth of what is on offer in art schools in Britain, the absence of the overwhelming spectre of the 'master', the collectivity of convenor groups, are, at their best, instrumental in foregrounding education as a form of actualization – as a mode in which meaning is not inherent

or immanent within those who study, not imposed by a dominant authority, but comes into being in the moment of actualization. Odd, then, that such an unstable pedagogy should have been captured and held hostage by such an overwhelming bureaucracy – unless perhaps that bureaucracy is afraid of the very challenge such an approach would represent to its sovereignty.

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